OPINION

BY HUMA YUSUF

Hovering danger

THIS year kicked off on a gloomy trajectory from a security perspective. Pakistan saw a 34 per cent year-on-year increase in militant attacks in 2025, with 95pc of these occurring in KP and Balochistan. Border closures with Afghanistan have abated their frequency, but the security challenge is likely to persist. A concerning feature of recent militant violence is the increased use of drones by proscribed groups. So far concentrated in KP, this is a worrying trend with national implications.

A recent report in this paper detailed how militant groups are using 'swarms' of quadcopters to carry out attacks against KP security forces. The KP police are using anti-drone systems in Peshawar and Bannu, and anti-drone guns in other restive districts, but require wider deployment of anti-drone technology.

Pakistan can currently access the cheapest drones and related tech produced by China and Turkiye, both close allies. But the more the state deploys this technology, the more its opponents will manipulate it to their own advantage. The proliferation of drone usage by varied non-state actors is likely, including separatist groups, outlawed religio-political groups, organised criminal groups, etc.

Drones are also likely to be used in increasingly creative ways. TTP already uses them to transport medication, small equipment and batteries. There is also the example of Mexican drug cartels using modified drones to deliver drugs.

Growing drone use will contribute to the experience of perma-conflict for many Pakistanis, manifest in the constant buzz of drones, whether they are used for surveillance, as a way to maintain territorial control, or to carry out attacks with drone-enabled IEDs. An acknowledged consequence of the normalisation of drone usage is the lowered threshold for initiating violent engagements by both state and non-state actors. As drones reduce both the human toll (from the operator's perspective) and financial cost of a clash, engagements are more readily commenced, but with material consequences nonetheless.

Drones typically lead to the urbanisation of conflict, as it is easier to conduct surveillance and infiltrate dense civilian spaces from above. Drones also make it easier to pursue strategic targets that are otherwise well defended against conventional attacks. For example, the Houthis in Yemen began using drones to target key oil facilities.

Beyond the widening of the conflict arena, drones also take a major psychological toll on civilians, unlike conventional weaponry. This has been well documented in the erstwhile tribal areas in the first part of this century, when US drone strikes were common. Muhammad Amir Rana in these pages described the anguish of KP's residents who are increasingly exposed to drone conflict —– the constant buzz of drones, the lack of clarity about what might happen, questions about whether the drones are the military's or terrorists', whether civilians are being protected or persecuted, and the inability to hold anyone accountable for the damage wrought. More drones will lead to more disruptions to daily life, more paranoia, more suffering.

The paranoia is unlikely to remain confined to conflict areas, though. Militant groups within Pakistan and globally increasingly use drones for propaganda purposes — to film videos of attacks and other fund-raising or radicalising activities, to drop leaflets and broadcast announcements. Drone-enabled media produced to circulate on social media platforms, particularly graphic descriptions of successful militant attacks, including drone attacks, will contribute to disinformation and intensify civilian paranoia. Additional challenges will emerge as security forces, and eventually non-state actors, begin to deploy AI-guided drones. AI systems may misinterpret complex environments — whether rugged terrain or informal urban settlements — leading to a high risk of civilian casualties or collateral damage. Cybersecurity breaches could also lead to the misuse of drones by nefarious actors.

> Drones also take a major mental toll on civilians.

Of course, the key victims of widespread drone usage will be accountability, due process and basic rights. Global drone usage in the 21st century has transgressed the bounds of existing humanitarian frameworks and the technology remains one step ahead of regulatory frameworks. This not only erodes the credibility of legislation and regulation, and further endangers citizen-state relations, but also means that conflict and related activities such as surveillance and propaganda can be conducted by all sides unimpeded and potentially unlawfully.

Given that drones will remain a reality of the contemporary conflict landscape, one hopes regulation will keep apace to secure the public's safety and human rights to the extent possible. ■

The writer is a political and integrity risk analyst.
X: @humayusuf

BY ASAD ZAMAN

Real national wealth

WHEN we think about wealthy nations, we picture what wealth looks like: skyscrapers, motorways, factories. For most of history, what made nations wealthy was what they could own, grow, or extract — fertile land, mines, and oil.

But this picture is outdated. A World Bank report, *Where Is the Wealth of Nations?* (2006), treated wealth as a balance sheet. Beyond natural resources and produced capital, it highlighted a third component: "intangible capital" — the skills and health of people, and the institutions that turn effort into output.

Most modern wealth is intangible: roughly 80 per cent in high-income countries, and over half even in low-income ones. Countries grow rich mainly because of what their people can do — and how well their systems let them do it.

This reframes development strategy. Instead of hunting for a magic lever — exports, FDI, a new corridor — we must invest in our children. Here, I focus on education: it builds human capital, and it shapes the people — and the habits — that make institutions function.

Education builds human capital most efficiently when teaching happens in a language children already understand well. When children are expected to study mathematics, science, or history in a language they barely command, effort goes into decoding words instead of building concepts. This leads to loss of confidence, rote learning, and higher dropout rates.

International experience is instructive. Japan and South Korea modernised without making English the medium of mass schooling. They imported modern scientific and technical knowledge the practical way: by translating it. A clarifying example: if the Nobel Prize went to a Japanese or Turkish novel, millions would read it in translation; few would learn the language to read the original.

Knowledge spreads by translation, not by turning whole populations into linguists. Deep learning grows from deep language mastery, and mass learning requires a language the masses already understand.

History makes the same point through one of the most powerful learning technologies ever devised: books. What is often called Europe's 'Dark Ages' began to lift as texts and ideas — many preserved and advanced in the Muslim world — entered through Spain and Sicily and were translated into Latin. The printing press then turned elite knowledge into a mass phenomenon: books multiplied, literacy expanded, and ideas spread fast enough to reshape societies. Where printing and publishing were delayed or constrained, books stayed scarce and expensive, and knowledge remained concentrated.

Books, then, are infrastructure. A society that writes, translates, prints, and distributes books widely in the language of its people builds the foundations of mass literacy and mass capability. A society that confines serious knowledge to a foreign tongue builds walls around its own potential.

Pakistan's education crisis has many causes, but one design feature is inherited: schooling as a ladder to a small number of government and elite jobs, not a mass project of learning. In that architecture, a colonial-era hierarchy of language and status still acts as a filter: the credential that matters is not what a child understands, but what signals they can display — degrees, exam results, and, above all, ease in English. Field research across low-income countries repeatedly finds that for many families a government job remains the clearest route to security; in such a world, it is rational for parents and schools to chase signals. The tragedy is that when education becomes a sorting machine, most children are asked to compete in a language they cannot yet read — and learning is sacrificed to selection.

> Mass learning requires a language the masses already understand.

Evidence synthesised by MIT's Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) points to a practical fix: stop selling schooling as a lottery ticket for a distant government job. Organise it to deliver visible learning at every stage — teach children at their current level, prioritise foundational reading and math, and track progress so gains are measurable and motivating.

Mass education — necessary for progress — therefore requires *democratising knowledge* in a practical sense: building serious *translation and publishing pipelines* in Urdu and Pakistan's regional languages; producing high-quality textbooks and *books* children can actually understand; and shifting from prestige-oriented credentialism towards learning that delivers early, visible gains in comprehension, confidence, and capability. Teach English well — as a subject and a skill — but stop using it as the medium that blocks understanding, especially in the early grades. A nation cannot develop on a curriculum it cannot read. ■

The writer is a professor at Akhuwat Institute, Kasur.

FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1976 | Fifty years ago

Hockey series win

LAHORE: Pakistan defeated touring West Germany by a wide margin of 6-3 to win the international hockey match series here at the Gaddafi Stadium this afternoon [Jan 4]. Pakistan won the first international match at Rawalpindi by 4-3 and today's victory gave them a 2-0 lead in the series. Playing an all-out attacking game Pakistanis snatched a comfortable lead at half time having notched up four goals against two.… The highlight of the play was the hat-trick by West German player Wolfgang Stroedter and three goals by Pakistan's celebrated right [full-back] Manzoorul Hasan. Giving a scintillating performance Manzoor scored three goals, two from penalty corners and one off the penalty-stroke.

… The man of today's match was right-winger Islahuddin who … tore apart the West German defence.… The West Germans found it … difficult to stop him from entering their goal area. … Though Pakistan played a far superior game for most part of the match, the proceedings were marked with the two umpires giving occasional marching orders to players from both sides. Punjab Chief Minister Sadiq Husain Qureshi, who is also the President of the Pakistan Hockey Federation, was the chief guest. — News agencies.

1951 | Seventy-five years ago

Nehru criticism

LONDON: Mr Nehru could not have enjoyed his early morning cup of coffee this morning [Jan 4]. As he picked up almost every London morning paper he was confronted with a broadside attack — from practically every angle — on his policy. Even the Manchester and Scotch newspapers had something deprecatory to say about Bharat's Prime Minister's present policy with regard to foreign and Kashmir affairs.

Apart from leading articles the *Manchester Guardian* carries a dispatch from its Bombay correspondent referring to the increasing criticism in Bharat itself of the Prime Minister's "open mind, shut eyes" policy and warns that although this criticism is only a ripple it could grow into a tidal wave.

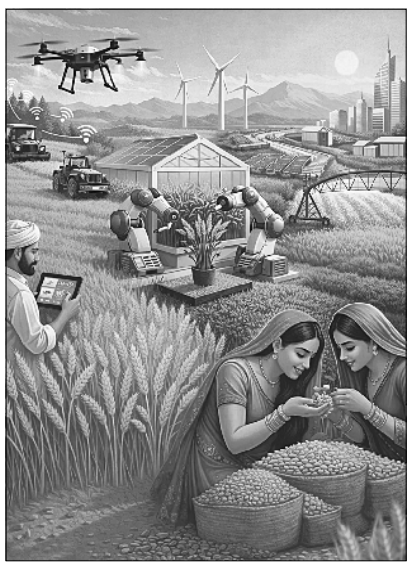
Some most straightforward criticism comes from the *Daily Express*. "The Bharati Prime Minister seems to be a man of two words," observes its leader. It says: "Outside the world he presents himself as one who will go to any lengths to secure peace. Yet inside his own sub-continent his Government has resorted to the harshest tactics in its Kashmir dispute with Bharat's weaker neighbour, Pakistan." — *Dawn* Express Service

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@dawn.com

Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.

Overall wheat yield is seriously sub-par



WHEAT is a cornerstone of national food security as well as rural livelihood, serving as the staple diet for over 200 million people and providing essential by-products for livestock feed and agro-based industries. Despite its importance, national wheat productivity remains well below potential.

During 2023-24, wheat was cultivated on 9.73 million hectares and produced 31.8 million tonnes, but the average yield (3,268kg/ha) remained far lower than the potential yield of 5,000 to 8,000 kg/ha. This persistent gap is driven by multiple constraints, such as inefficient irrigation, imbalanced fertiliser use, delayed sowing, poor crop rotation, low seed quality, and limited adoption of climate-smart technologies.

Post-harvest losses and weak extension services further exacerbate the problem. Addressing these challenges requires integrated, research-based interventions supported by strong institutional frameworks. Proper land preparation is crucial for achieving the productive potential of wheat, influencing all growth stages from germination to grain formation. Optimised tillage practices, such as a sequence of mould-board ploughing, disc harrowing, rotavation and planking, can increase yields by 13-30 per cent.

Laser land-levelling is also important, enhancing irrigation uniformity, reducing runoff, and improving water-use efficiency. Research shows that laser levelling needs to be repeated every three years, which significantly increases net income and reduces water use by more than half compared to the traditional methods. These improvements can really lay the foundation for better plant establishment and more sustainable wheat production.

The sowing method plays a very decisive role in wheat productivity. Conventional methods that are commonly used lead to poor germination and high water consumption. In contrast, modern sowing techniques, such as ridge planting, raised-bed planting, and drill sowing, can increase yields by 9-22pc while significantly improving water-use efficiency. Each method requires specific tillage sequences and irrigation practices to maximise performance.

Equally important is the alignment of suitable wheat varieties with appropriate row spacing and timely sowing. Delayed sowing can reduce yields by 8-64pc, while early sowing enables various varieties to escape heat stress and disease, resulting in higher productivity.

Poor weed control and disease management practices result in 17-25pc losses in the wheat yield, which is also threatened by fungal diseases, including rust, loose smut, and root rot, that can reduce the yields by up to 50pc. Early planting combined with balanced fertilisation can help mitigate rust infestation across various wheat varieties.

Balanced fertiliser use and efficient irrigation scheduling represent additional pillars of sustainable wheat production. Excessive irrigation in conventional systems leads to nutrient leaching, shallow water tables, waterlogging, and groundwater deterioration. Proper irrigation timing and depth ensure that nutrients remain within the root zone, and that water resources are conserved.

Pakistan's wheat productivity challenge is deeply rooted in agronomic, institutional and environmental factors. Bridging the yield gap requires a holistic, climate-smart approach that integrates precision land preparation, advanced sowing techniques, balanced nutrient management, scientific irrigation scheduling, and proactive weed and disease control.

Strengthening the extension services, improving access to quality inputs, and aligning agricultural policies with research-based recommendations are critical for sustainable improvement.

By adopting modern technologies and evidence-based practices, Pakistan can significantly enhance wheat productivity, ensuring national food security, economic resilience, and a more sustainable future for millions who depend on this vital crop.

Dr Nazar Gul
Deputy Director
Hafiz Abdul Salam
Director, Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources (PCRWR)
Islamabad

A future scenario

ARTIFICIAL intelligence (AI) is speedily becoming very popular as more and more people use it to save time. However, it is now impossible to say with certainty whether a particular video clip is fake or real. We know that there are many people who go berserk when they see videos of their womenfolk dancing or even photos in which they are seen seated next to men who are not their close relatives. What if someone posts a fake video or obscene photo of a woman (who has rejected his advances) on social media and sends it to her relatives?

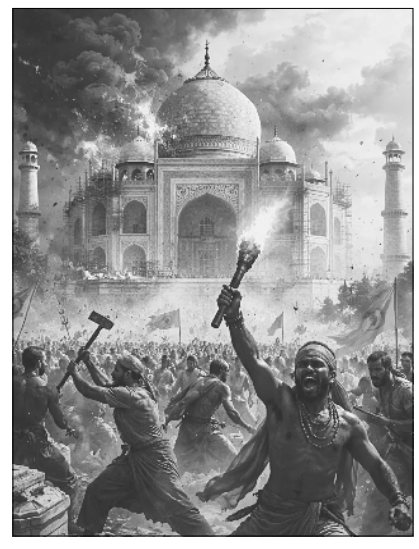
Things have got so bad that it is now impossible to even talk to others without getting into an argument. If, for example, I mention a video of a cult leader saying something controversial, the immediate response is, "It's probably AI-generated". Neither side is in a apposition to establish authority of the claim in such cases.

Of course, there is a positive side to it also. In school, we were taught that politics and religious topics should be avoided when talking to friends or strangers. So the only safe thing left is sports, like, say, cricket. I know for sure that I would not be lynched if I say that a particular cricketer should not be selected for the next tour.

Certainly, a more serious problem is likely to surface in a few decades from now, when, fortunately I have no chance of being alive. When robots become increasingly like humans in appearance, how will someone know if the man or woman talking to them is real?

Shakir Lakhani
Karachi

The threat to Taj



EVERY time India seeks to revive nationalist sentiments, it seems to find new ways to glorify the ideology of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The latest attempt comes in the form of the Tejo Mahalaya theory — a claim that the Taj Mahal was once a temple. The idea was originally proposed by P.N. Oak, an Indian revisionist historian known for his extremist interpretations of the past.

In his writings, Oak alleged that Shah Jahan had purchased the monument from Maharaja Jai Singh, and transformed it into a tomb for Mumtaz Mahal, his beloved wife. However, this assertion has been repeatedly rejected by the Indian judiciary.

Two separate petitions have already been dismissed by the higher courts, both confirming that the Taj Mahal is, indeed, a Muslim-built structure.

The responsibility of historians is to uncover and preserve truth, not to bend it according to their religious or political convenience. The attempt to reinvent the Taj Mahal's identity is more than just a historical dispute; it is part of a broader effort to redefine India's cultural and religious narrative. Such efforts, however, can neither diminish the Mughal legacy nor erase the architectural brilliance that stands as a testament to a shared past.

Hasnain Ahmad Thaheem
Lahore

A lingering issue

THE severe sewerage problem faced by the residents of State Bank Society and the surrounding areas has now become a persistent phenomenon, which has become a nuisance for the entire locality. The 48-inch main sewerage line running the length of Gulzar-i-Hijri Road has far outlived its lifespan and now requires urgent attention. This aging infrastructure has developed a disturbing tendency to break down every couple of months. These frequent breakdowns have serious consequences for the entire area.

The blockage and overflow of sewer often affect neighbouring societies, including Gwalior Society, Madras Society, PCSIR Society and even Karachi University. One of the most alarming issues is the contamination of freshwater lines, as sewer, after seeping into the ground, mixes with the potable water supply.

This contaminated water eventually reaches the underground tanks of households, putting the health and safety of the residents at risk.

Although the Karachi Water and Sewerage Corporation (KWSC) has been making temporary repairs, these measures are short-term and fail to address the root cause of the problem. The repairs are ineffective, often lasting only a few months before the issues resurface. This cycle of temporary fixes has left the residents frustrated and in constant fear of another breakdown. The situation has reached a point where the need for a permanent solution is undeniable.

The sewerage line must be replaced entirely with new piping that meets the highest standards of quality. A thorough and lasting solution is necessary not only to ensure the smooth operation of the system, but also to protect the health of the residents and improve the overall living conditions of the communities in the area.

Ahmed Saad
Karachi

▶ **DANGEROUS BRIDGE:** I visited the University of Turbat recently to meet my friends, and on my way had to cross the D-Baloch Bridge. The bridge is in a disastrous condition, posing a serious risk to the life of students who have to use it every day to reach the campus. Obviously, the life of everyone who uses it is in danger. Iron and steel bars are seen through the concrete. The situation is so bad that a police official stands there to warn the commuters of the hazard ahead. Instead of deploying constables, the government should reconstruct the bridge.
Yasir Khalil
Karachi

▶ **DELAYED CONSTRUCTION:** The ongoing construction of the Babarlo Bridge has been making life tough for thousands of commuters and people living in the vicinity. Traffic congestion is a major problem due to narrow passageways and construction machinery. Long queues on the road often delay even ambulances, putting lives in danger. Improper lighting, abrupt diversions, and uneven roads make the area accident-prone, particularly for the motorcyclists. Dust and debris from construction work severely affect residents' health, and damage businesses in the area. The officials concerned should take all the necessary steps to expedite the pace of the project.
Abdul Manan
Sukkur

▶ **ANKARA PARK:** Located on Park Road near Rawal Dam, the Ankara Park provides much relief to people amid the noise and rush of urban life. This place is especially popular among people who come for morning walks, jogging and light exercises. It is also a suitable destination for families where children can play freely and elders can enjoy peaceful time there. However, the park has not received the attention of the authorities that it truly deserves. There is a clear need for improvement in cleanliness, children's play equipment, and other facilities. If the authorities concerned show a little seriousness, this park may well be counted among Islamabad's prominent public parks.
Shaukat Hayat
Buner

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is *Dawn's* External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of *Dawn's* code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
Email: dawnombudsman@gmail.com